
Justice on a Changing Frontier: Deer Lick Creek, 1824–1825

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The massacre of nine Native Americans at Deer Lick Creek in Madison County, Indiana, in May, 1824, and the subsequent apprehension, trial, and punishment of the perpetrators of these murders is an interesting case study that is both typical yet remarkable in the general pattern of Indian-white relations in nineteenth-century America. Although, tragically, the brutal slaughter of peaceful Indians was not uncommon on the frontier during this period, the successful prosecution of individuals accused of such crimes was extremely unusual; and the trials, convictions, and executions of James Hudson, John Bridge, Sr., and Andrew Sawyer provide a rare example of what appeared to be equitable frontier justice.

The decades preceding the murders at Deer Lick Creek bore bloody witness to interracial conflict in the region of the Old Northwest. Although whites and Native Americans were supposedly at peace following the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, the boundary line between Indian and white lands, as delineated by the treaty, was violated more than it was honored, and violence continued. Eager to gain access to rich farmlands within the remaining Indian territories, frontier whites repeatedly crossed over to hunt and settle on Indian lands, and Native Americans who dared to venture near these settlements were often considered fair game by white frontiersmen. In 1801 William Henry Harrison complained that most frontiersmen “consider the murdering of Indians in the highest degree meritorious,” while other officials admitted that “the number of those unhappy people who have been killed since the peace of Greenville . . . is great enough to give a very serious alarm for the consequences.” Although Native Americans daily were subjected to “injustice and wrongs of the most provoking character,” Indian agents lamented that they had “never heard that any person was ever brought to justice.”¹

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¹William Henry Harrison to Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War, July 15, 1801, in *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*; Vol. I, 1800–1811, ed. Logan

Embittered by such treatment, many Indians in Ohio and Indiana turned to the pan-tribal movement of Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet, and during the War of 1812 they joined with the British in a last futile attempt to force the Americans from their homelands. In the postwar period American officials continued to purchase Indian lands in the Old Northwest, and pressure mounted for the tribes to leave the region and move west beyond the Mississippi. Ironically, many Shawnees and Senecas from northern Ohio had remained loyal to the United States during the War of 1812 and had assisted the Americans during the conflict, yet white settlement also threatened these friendly Indians as frontiersmen from southern Ohio and Kentucky surged northward after the war to occupy the Auglaize River valley in Ohio and the fertile prairies north of the Wabash in Indiana.

It was a new group of settlers who came to the newly opened lands of central Indiana after 1813. Before the war most migrants who had ventured into southern Indiana were hardened veterans of earlier pioneering efforts in western Pennsylvania, Virginia, or Kentucky. Many had spent most of their adult lives on the move, residing for short periods at or near the western fringe of white settlement. As a region passed into a more settled state, these early frontiersmen often relocated farther west, again following the frontier as it progressed toward the Mississippi Valley. In addition, most of these first pioneers had lived with the threat (or perceived threat) of Indian warfare much of their lives, and they regarded Native Americans as perennial enemies.

In contrast, many of the settlers who established homes and communities along the Wabash in the decade following the War of 1812 were of a different stock. They had been attracted to the upper Wabash Valley by the potentially fertile farmland in the region, but unlike their predecessors they planned to reside permanently in their new homes. Less adventurous than the frontiersmen who earlier had moved into the Kentucky or Indiana "wilderness," the newcomers formed communities along the Wabash and its tributaries in Madison County and envisioned a prosperous (if staid) settled life. They hoped that their small frontier communities would develop into villages or towns similar to those in the east and that they eventually could take their place as "substantial citizens" of a "civilized" region. Moreover, most of these newer, post-War of 1812 settlers had had less exposure to frontier violence and less experience in warfare with Indians. They envisioned their remaining Native American neighbors as a necessary, if temporary, nuisance, but they believed that the federal government eventually would force them to remove from Indiana. They

Esarey (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. VII; Indianapolis, 1922), 25-31, quotation 25; Arthur St. Clair to James Smith, June 4, 1800, in *The St. Clair Papers . . .*, ed. William Henry Smith (1881; reprint, 2 vols., Freeport, N.Y., 1970), II, 495-96; Jacob Burnet to St. Clair, August 20, 1800, *ibid.*, 525-26; Address of St. Clair to the territorial legislature, November 5, 1800, *ibid.*, 501-10.

most certainly did not wish to participate in any military campaign against the tribes still in Indiana, and they resented any irresponsible actions that might precipitate Indian warfare.²

The Bridge, Harper, Sawyer, and Hudson families who carried out the Deer Lick Creek massacre appear typical of the earlier frontiersmen who had penetrated the Ohio Valley in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Both Bridge and Harper were from Hamilton County, Ohio, a region that had borne the brunt of Indian raiding prior to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 and where many residents continued to harbor resentment toward Native Americans. In addition, these three families remained transient: they readily moved from one homestead to the next. Although they had settled in Madison County, and John T. Bridge at least had been elected to an early county office, they seemed to reside on the periphery of the more settled white community. They participated in community activities such as the Jones's "house raising," but they seemed to be viewed with some reservations by more permanent residents. Indeed, John T. Bridge and particularly Thomas Harper are classic representatives of the earlier settlers usually associated with a more primitive frontier, a time and place in which random violence against Indians was more acceptable. The willingness of Bridge, Harper, and their companions to attack and murder the Senecas is indicative of their callous assumption that all Indians, regardless of their obvious peaceful intentions, should be considered as potential enemies. For these frontier transients the Senecas were outside of any social or moral obligations normally extended to other white Americans. They were envisioned as less than human.

Ironically, the victims of the Deer Lick massacre were Native Americans with close ties to the United States. They were residents of Lewis Town, a mixed community of Shawnees and Senecas located on the headwaters of the Great Miami River in modern Logan County, Ohio. During the War of 1812 this multiracial community had been led by Captain Lewis, a Shawnee village chief, and by Logan, another Shawnee/Seneca who was undoubtedly the father or uncle of one of the murder victims. Shawnees and Senecas from this village had opposed the rise of Tecumseh and the Shawnee Prophet and were among the most loyal of those tribesmen who supported the Americans against the British during the War of 1812. They had served as scouts for American military expeditions; had fought with the American army at Fort Meigs, where they had been besieged by Tecumseh and the British; and in October, 1813, had assisted William Henry Harrison at the Battle of the Thames, in which Tecumseh had

² John Mack Faragher's *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven, Conn., 1986) provides an excellent case study of class and transition in a community on the midwestern frontier. Also see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York, 1978).

been killed and the British had been routed.³ Indeed, the elder Logan had been killed in November, 1812, while fighting for the Americans, and both Logan County and Logansville, Ohio, were subsequently named in his honor.⁴ In the postwar period Native Americans at Lewis Town continued their friendship with the United States, cooperated with Quaker missionaries, and were considered models of acculturation by federal Indian agents. They were hardly hostile Indians.⁵

In retrospect, the settlers' arrest of the suspects is not too surprising. At least some of the accused were marginal members of the Deer Lick Creek community, and more established settlers feared Native American retaliation. Led by Moses Cox, the clerk of Madison County, these citizens first kept the suspects under surveillance, then formed a posse that arrested them. John Johnston's role in the proceedings also is predictable. As an Indian agent entrusted to keep the peace, he was eager to support white settlers who seemed to act in the victims' behalf, and the arrest of the perpetrators certainly assuaged the demands for retribution that emerged from the murdered victims' relatives at Lewis Town. The continued cooperation between federal and local authorities and the federal government's commitment to pay the considerable expenses involved in the criminals' lengthy incarceration seem remarkable, but federal officials may have had ulterior motives. By 1824 they were already negotiating with Native American leaders from the Lewis Town community for their remaining lands in Ohio and for their removal to the west. Johnston, Lewis Cass, and other federal officials did not wish to see their efforts jeopardized by senseless violence along the Wabash.⁶

³ "Copy of an Agreement with the Wyandot, Shawnee, and Mingo chiefs made by William Hull, June 8, 1812," Shawnee File, Great Lakes–Ohio Valley Indian Archives (Glenn A. Black Laboratory of Archaeology, Bloomington, Indiana); John Johnston to John Armstrong, June 4, 1813, *ibid.*; Statement by John Johnston, Tecumseh Papers, 11YY20, Lyman C. Draper Collection (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison); Benjamin Stickney to Jacob Fowler, May 3, 1813, Michigan Papers (William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan); Harrison to John Armstrong, Secretary of War, October 9, 1813, Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Unregistered Series, Record Group 107, National Archives Microfilm Publication M222, roll 8, pp. 3007-13 (National Archives).

⁴ Johnston to Henry Brown, December 2, 1812, John Johnston Papers (Cincinnati Historical Society); Harrison to William Eustis, Secretary of War, December 14, 1812, in *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, II, 246-48; Robert Breckinridge McAfee, *History of the Late War in the Western Country . . .* (Lexington, Ky., 1816), 472-76.

⁵ Henry Harvey, *History of the Shawnee Indians from the Year 1681 to 1854, Inclusive* (Cincinnati, 1855), 161-314 *passim*; Josiah Meigs to John C. Calhoun, April 20, 1820, Shawnee File, Great Lakes–Ohio Valley Indian Archives.

⁶ Captain Lewis to James Barbour, Secretary of War, March 9, 1825, Records of the Michigan Superintendency, 1814–1851, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives Microfilm Publication M1, roll 28, pp. 175-76 (National Archives); William Clark to Thomas McKenney, January 11, 1825, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, St. Louis Superintendency, National Archives Microfilm Publication M234, roll 747, pp. 166-69, *ibid.*; Speeches of the Shawnee and Cherokee chiefs, January 7, 1825, *ibid.*

In retrospect, however, the conviction of the perpetrators ranks as a relatively rare instance in which white men accused of murdering Native Americans were convicted by a jury of other settlers. In comparison to the acquittal of John M. Chivington following the brutal massacre of Cheyenne women and children at Sand Creek (1864); the acquittal of the mob who slaughtered almost one hundred peaceful Apaches at Camp Grant in Arizona (1871); and the repeated exculpation of miners accused of murdering Indians in frontier California, the Deer Lick Creek convictions and subsequent executions stand out as memorable incidents in the American judicial system. Justice was served. The guilty were punished. The Native American community was satisfied. Yet it might be argued that the guilty were not convicted by a jury of their "peers." The community that had emerged along the central Wabash was composed of a new class of less adventuresome, more settled pioneers than the earlier frontiersmen who came to the area. Their conviction of the murderers served notice of their own respectability. It also underlined the fact that Madison County had passed beyond its incipient stage. Those residents who still adhered to the values of a former frontier would be forced to change or pay the consequences.